

OBITUARY



LE TEMPS MARCHE SI VITE—IN MEMORY OF KONRAD THALER

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It is hard in the moment of sorrow to measure the degree of loss, but European arachnologists must come to terms with the passing of one of their most influential figures. On the 11th June, 2005, Konrad Thaler died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 64 during a student excursion in the Stubaier Alps. With him we have lost someone who has left his

mark on a whole generation of zoogeographers, taxonomists, mountain ecologists and entomologists and who was described at his funeral by a long-time friend as a scientist of “enthusiastic heart and rational words”.

Konrad Thaler was born on December 19th, 1940 in Innsbruck, Austria and stayed true to his Tyrolean mountains throughout his life.

After attending school in Innsbruck, he received his leaving certificate in 1958, spent two years in military service and began his studies in zoology and botany at the University of Innsbruck in 1959/60. His professors, H. Janetschek, O. Steinböck, H. Gams and W. Larcher, were important figures in the study of Alpine biogeography. His 1967 dissertation was (in translation): “On the spider fauna of Northern Tyrol (excluding Linyphiidae and Micryphantidae. Prelude to a catalog of the large spiders of North Tyrol)”. Subsequently, linyphiids would become one of his favorite groups. Field-experience and much material for future revisions was gathered in the six years he spent at the Alpine Research Station in Oberegurgl, before taking on an assistant post at the University of Innsbruck in 1970. He submitted his 1978 ‘Habilitation’ thesis on “The taxonomy and zoogeography of Alpine spiders” and since 1983 led the department of Terrestrial Ecology and Taxonomy at the Institute of Zoology and Limnology of Innsbruck University. He was a council member of the “Centre International de Documentation Arachnologique” (CIDA) from 1986–1989, CIDA (later ISA) correspondent for Austria, and President of the Austrian Entomological Society from 2002–2005.

Konrad Thaler died at the peak of his productivity. Until the very end he worked tirelessly each day, almost as if he knew how little time he had left. The bare facts are clear: between 1963 and 2005 he authored or co-authored more than 220 journal articles. There was a continual increase in his yearly output: on average one a year during his time in Oberegurgl (1964–1970), three as a university Assistant (1970–1978), and seven a year since his ‘Habilitation’ in 1978. Since 2002 alone he published 40 papers! Additionally, there were popular science articles, often in the journal of the Austrian Alpine Society, plus abstracts and book reviews. From 1973–2005 he supervised 41 diploma theses and 10 PhDs; mostly faunistic and ecological, or taxonomic and morphological projects. As well as arachnids, he supervised numerous studies of myriapods and beetles. Thanks to his careful record-keeping, we know he gave exactly 100 presentations at Austrian and international meetings; the last four days before his death on “Areal forms of invertebrates in the eastern Alps”.

It is hard to pick out individual research highlights. His work on the arachnids near Lunz in Austria (Thaler 1963), published when he was only 23, remains of great value as the first, and until recently, the only record of males of the parthenogenetic harvestman *Megabunus lesserti*. Characteristic would be the serial publications “Über wenig bekannte Zwergspinnen aus den Alpen”, which was published over nine issues; as well as “Fragmenta Faunistica Tirolensia”. Here, Konrad attempted, as part of partial inventory of the North-Tyrol fauna, to make what little was known about the less-familiar invertebrate groups successively accessible; thus impressively demonstrating the breadth of his knowledge. The reprints of part 17 (Thaler 2005) were posted on the day of his death. In his last years he was particularly keen to produce summary works, such as the faunistic synopsis of North-Tyrol spiders (Thaler 1998) and a review of the ecology of high-Alpine species (Thaler 2003). Also important was his editorial work on the “Diversity and biology of spiders, scorpions and other arachnids” which included papers from long-term collaborators and showed Austria as a working environment for arachnologists (Thaler 2004). For a full measure of the merit of his life’s work one should compare our state of knowledge at the end of his studies in the “Contributions to the spider fauna of North-Tyrol” (Thaler 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997a,b, 1999) with how things were before he started, when the spiders were “. . . an unhappy picture of insufficient faunistic research.” (translated from Holdhaus 1954). A full inventory of Austrian spiders (begun by Thaler & Knoflach 2002, 2003, 2004) was sadly not to be completed in his lifetime.

Konrad’s taxonomic work included the authorship of two genera (*Carniella*, *Mysmeniola*), 77 species and one subspecies of spider, and one harvestman species. Of these, 48 he collected himself, and none have so far proved to be synonyms. His new taxa spanned 17 families, predominantly Linyphiidae (42 species) and Amaurobiidae (12 species), with a geographical concentration in the Alps and the Mediterranean. Twenty-six species from various animal groups bear his name, including twelve spiders, four flies, a tardigrade and an oligochaete worm.

It’s obvious that such productivity could

only be achieved through great personal and passionate commitment to research. For Konrad, science was his life-work (*labor vincit omnia*). Insiders knew one could invariably meet Konrad in the institute seven days a week, so long as he wasn't on excursion. He had the good fortune with his second wife Barbara to find an equally enthusiastic and talented comrade-in-arms. Their years together were a particularly productive phase of cooperative activity, during which the Mediterranean arachnids became a further focus of research.

Although he enjoyed considerable international recognition, his achievements were not always recognized by his own institute. Here, he was often accused of failing to keep up with the latest trends or buzz-words. It is not that he rejected, for example, molecular methods, but simply felt that "... the state of knowledge achievable by 'conventional' means was far from being reached. . .". Indeed it was through conventional methods that Konrad became a leading figure of 20th century arachnology. His death means, regrettably, a further substantial loss of taxonomic expertise among the German-language universities. It can only be hoped that those in authority recognize the consequences of this before it is too late.

Everyone who visited Konrad in his office was impressed by the concentration of literature, in particular the many originals of standard works and a rich collection of comparative material. They were also astounded by their host's memory. Konrad could recognize almost every Central European spider, without the use of literature, and when he said "I haven't seen anything like that before." you knew you had found something special. But most of all, people remember his courtesy and helpfulness, his stimulating inquisitiveness, constant ability to enthuse and his many words of encouragement. As an example, between two stressful meetings he was asked to check the identification of a *Troglohyphantes* male and got up from the microscope with the words "Thanks for the nice view". No one left his room without a better understanding, a constructive thought, or feeling more motivated. He always had an open door for his students and it is no accident that shortly after his death many of them offered thanks on the university homepage for his remarkable per-

sonal contact and the enthusiasm and devotion he brought to his teaching.

Administrative duties meant that despite his discipline and industry, time for research became increasingly scarce. He often wrote of a "Mountain of paper in front of the microscope." and the "Lure of the mountains for arachnological collecting". At the 8th meeting of the German-speaking arachnologists in Salzburg, he mused about whether we should go into the Alps, simply to enjoy the distinctive fauna or the landscape *per se*. For Konrad, life without the mountains was impossible to imagine. He felt happiest at 3,000 m; where the motto might have been: concentrate on that which is most important. Longer collecting trips were made to the Caucasus, Pyrenees and Atlas mountains, where the local guides were said to have whispered "he marches like an Arab". His student trips into the Alps were legendary, and up to the very end he would be walking way ahead of the younger participants, especially on critical passes. The excursions took place in all weathers, often with the résumé that this enabled one to better understand the requirements of Alpine animals. It seems fate that Konrad died during his final regular student excursion, only a few months before he was due to retire, when he would have had more time for fieldwork and his own projects. His friends, colleagues and students must now take over his legacy and try to "... write at least one new line each day".

For advice and information we are very grateful to Barbara Knoflach. A German version of this obituary has been published in the *Arachnologische Mitteilungen* 30 (2005), which also includes a complete bibliography of Konrad Thaler's publications by this date. We thank the editors for permission to offer this translation.

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